DOCUMENTS

Kornei Chukovsky

HOW I BECAME A WRITER

The journal "Yunost" (Youth) published Kornei Chukovsky's last radio talk, taped by the editors of the All-Russian Radio in August of last year.
When the talk was over, Kornei Ivanovich said to the broadcast editor: "You know, perhaps you were right to come to me today. Who knows, perhaps this will be my last recording for the radio. . . ."
These words, as our readers know, proved only too true. The talk we are publishing here is but one more proof that he worked right up to the last hour of his eighty-seven years of life.

Of course, it's no great pleasure to me to be introduced as one of the oldest writers in our country. There's nothing I can do about it, though: I have been writing and appearing in print now for close on seventy years.

When I was born in Petersburg, Turgenev was still alive, and Grigorovich and Goncharov, and Walt Whitman. It was no rarity to meet fortunate individuals who had seen Gogol or Adam Mickiewicz with their own eyes.

During my life-time mankind invented the automobile, the aeroplane, electric light, radio, television. To give you an even clearer idea to what a vast extent my old age has attained, I can tell you, not without a touch of pride, that my grand-daughter, who is a microbiologist, celebrated her 45th birthday quite recently, and that my great grand-daughter, not my grand-daughter, but my great grand-daughter, Mashenka, is a student at the Medical Institute and has just successfully completed her second year of study. So I have a perfect right to say in the words of a certain aged poet:

My morning, noon, and evening–all are past.
Nearer and nearer the darkness of night looms over me;
Vain now to cry: hold, speed not on so fast![1]

By the way, I see nothing terrible here, nothing to vex the spirit. Here I follow humbly in the footsteps of my adored Pushkin, who was never

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[1] A. M. Zhemchuzhnikov. *A Prelude to Songs of Farewell–Ed.*

able to summon up the kind of fear due to the threat of inevitable death. He expressed his attitude in the couplet:

Our grandchildren, all in good time,
Will crowd us from this Earthly clime.

Precisely: in *good* time. And I wish them joy of it!

The main thing which solaces my present old man's life and which fills it with living content is, of course, my work. A full day's work, from morning till evening. As soon as I get up at crack of dawn my legs take me merrily to one or other of my work-tables and I write without a break for three or four hours on end, for up till the present day–and I am 87 years old already–I have never given up my pen. Take away my pen–and I shall cease to breathe that very moment.

I am a Jack of all trades, I work simultaneously on two or three subjects, sometimes on four very different ones which it might well seem could scarcely be contained in one head. There might be a study in the history of literature such as I wrote on Nikolai Uspensky, Sleptsov, Druzhinin, Feofil Tolstoy, or a linguistic opus like the book *Live as Life*, or a portrait from memory like those included in my book *Contemporaries* or a children's story such as *Mukha-Tsokotukha*, *Chudo-derevo* or *Fyedorino gorye*, or perhaps, some new pages for my work *From Two to Five* on the psychology of small children or a new translation from Walt Whitman. In a word, I try to write and do write in all genres. . . .

Now, though, I want you to try and picture to yourself a lanky adolescent in Odessa, to where we had moved from Petersburg, with a shock of untidy hair, dressed in worn trousers, constantly hungry, in leaky shoes and with a black band round his head (why I wore that band I cannot explain to this day!), and to get used to the thought that this scarecrow is–I. When I walked down the street respectable people drew away from me, fearing for their purses and wallets. I had been expelled from school, I was making my own living, in any way that offered: sometimes I would help the fishermen to mend their nets, sometimes I would stick bills at the crossroads advertising coming attractions in the nature of parades and fireworks, sometimes, my bare feet wrapped in sacking, I would crawl over the roofs of Odessa's house, red-hot under a fierce sun, and with a special kind of palette knife I would clean from these roofs the old, cracked paint to prepare for the painters to put on a new coat.

My mother's friends were sorry for me and considered me hopelessly lost. They did not know that in secret from everyone I considered myself a great philosopher because, having swallowed a dozen or so books of various calibre–Schopenhauer, Mikhailovsky, Dostoevsky, Nietzsche,

Darwin–I had deduced from this hotch-potch an absurd theory about nature as an end in itself and therefore thought myself on a par with, if not higher than, all the Kants and Spinozas in the world. Every spare moment I ran into the library to devour books without any method or order: Kuno Fischer and Leskov, Spencer and Chekhov.

So it went on until 1898, when something very important happened to me which set the course of my whole subsequent life. I went to the flea-market to buy Flammarion's Astronomy. The Astronomy, however, was not to be had and from politeness, so as not to offend the owner of the bookstall, who had searched all through his stock to oblige me, I had to spend the same sum on Olendorf's *Teach Yourself English.* This Teach Yourself English book was dog-eared, with blotches of ink and grease, with missing pages, but nevertheless in the course of the first minute before I even got to my attic I found out the meaning of the English words: "ink," "a dog" and "a spoon." Soon I was so passionately interested in this invaluable information that I and my tattered book never parted company again for a whole year.

I took it with me wherever I went. After clambering up onto a roof, I would begin by taking a piece of chalk from my pocket and writing across the roof in bold, foreign letters: "I look," "my book," "I look at my book" and so on, thirty lines on end, and would then pace up and down over them trying to learn them by heart.

The first principles of English grammar were thus permanently installed in my mind.

As to the height of bliss I looked forward to the sweet day when Shakespeare, Walter Scott and my beloved Dickens would be as accessible to me as, say, Tolstoy or Gogol.

Now, when thanks to that shabby Olendorf I have read thousands of English books in the course of my life, I feel I have the right to say: long live self-education in all fields, amongst others in the learning of foreign tongues! Let us remember Gorky who acquired all his encyclopaedic knowledge from the books he had read. It is, of course, a splendid thing that our country is so rich in pedagogues, instructors, ready to help anybody to acquire any knowledge they may need, but only that knowledge which is acquired by our own efforts, following our own enthusiasms, is of lasting solid value. All knowledge should be a discovery which you have made for yourself.

So it was that in those years I discovered Walt Whitman.

Once, when I was down at the port, a strange sailor beckoned me to him and shoved a thick book into my hands. As he did so he looked about him guiltily as though the book had been illegal. (Sailors off foreign vessels often brought in contraband foreign books and pamphlets.)

In the evening after work I walked out along the pier to the lighthouse

and saw that it was a book of poetry written by one Walt Whitman, of whom I had never heard. I opened it at random and read the mad lines:

My ties and ballasts leave me, my elbows rest in sea-gaps,
I skirt sierras, my palms cover continents,
I am afoot with my vision...
Under Niagara, the cataract falling like a veil over my
countenance....
Walking the old hills of Judaea with the beautiful gentle
God by my side
Speeding through space, speeding through heaven and the stars....
I visit the orchards of spheres and look at the products,
And look at quintillions ripen'd and look at quintillions green.

I had never read such poetry. So that was what he was like, Walt Whitman! I was amazed by the newness of his feeling for the world and began to look at all my surroundings with new eyes: at the stars, at women, at blades of grass, at animals, at the line of the horizon out at sea, at the whole business of human life.

My youthful heart–for at that time I was only 17 years old–leapt to answer his calls to ardent friendship and his joyous hymns to equality, labour, democracy. I began to translate Walt Whitman, but, of course, I had not the faintest notion of how to set about literary translation.

To begin with I translated unspeakably. Now I feel ashamed when I remember those early translations of mine.

Afterwards, of course, I began to translate quite differently. My translations from Whitman came out in 1919, 1922 and 1935. One of these editions was published with an afterword by Lunacharsky. In 1944 a tenth edition of the book was published and now, in 1969, it is coming out yet again. In general my system is as follows: I rework each of my books again and again from beginning to end, trying always to increase the merits of the previous edition.

So that was how, in my youth, at the age of 17, I discovered Whitman. But Whitman was not my only discovery. There was also, of course, Chekhov, who influenced me even more than Whitman. Chekhov was my discovery. Now I have written a book about him, it was published last year and only now have many of my thoughts of that time found expression on paper. It is difficult nowadays even to imagine what Chekhov meant for our generation, for the adolescents of the nineties. Chekhov's books seemed to us to be the only ones to tell the truth about all that was happening in the world around us. You read a Chekhov story or novella and then you glanced out of the window and found yourself watching the continuation of what you had just been reading. All the inhabitants of our town–all of

them, without exception–were to me characters from Chekhov. It seemed there were no other kind of people. All their weddings, birthdays, conversations, ways of walking, hair-styles, gestures, even the folds of their garments seemed to be taken from Chekhov's books. And every cloud, every tree, every path in the forest, every townscape and landscape, I experienced as quotations from Chekhov. Such a unity of literature and life I have never yet observed. Even the sky above me was Chekhovian.

I, a provincial lad, considered him one of the greatest artists who had ever walked the earth. I remember how at school when speaking of Gogol's *The Pony-Trap* I said, to the indignation of the teacher, that it was so good it might have been written by Chekhov. I meted out the same praise to Lermontov's story *Taman.* And, if, in a novel or story by Turgenev, I was particularly pleased with some apt, well observed image, sketched in with fresh, energetic, confident strokes, I would say: "That is just like Chekhov!"

At that time I knew nothing about his life, did not even suspect the heroism of it, but in all his books and in the very language of his books, phenomenally rich, varied, plastic, I felt his great, over-abounding creative energy.

Most important, I could not at that time have imagined for myself an author with whom I felt so profoundly akin as I did with him. When Chekhov's story *My Life* came out in the magazine *Niva* (The Harvest Field) to which I subscribed at that time, it seemed to me as though that life were really *mine,* as though I had been reading my own diary, the life of a rootless lad of the 1890s. Whenever I made the acquaintance of some new person I mentally introduced him into the Chekhov context and only then did it become clear to me whether he was good or bad.

Chekhov was for me and my contemporaries the touch-stone for all problems and in his stories and novellas we clearly heard the voice of a guide and teacher.

At that time, in Odessa in the year 1898, I was living apart from my family, trying to live on my own earnings and writing my own book of philosophy.

It must be put on record here that one of my old school friends had grown interested in my philosophy and was kind enough to come up to my attic, and it was to him first that I read several chapters from this crazy book of mine, written in a half childish hand, which I keep to this day. He listened, listened and, when I had finished, said: "And do you know that that last chapter would do for the newspaper?" It was the part about art. He took it away with him and showed it to the editors of the newspaper *Odesskiye Novosti* (Odessa News) and, to my delight, to my great joy and pride, that article was actually published there, a long article on trends in contemporary art. I do not remember much about the article, but I do

remember very well that I received seven roubles for it and was at last able to buy myself a pair of new trousers at the flea-market.

That was the beginning of my literary career.

I wrote for that newspaper about anything and everything, mostly about pictures, because exhibitions of pictures were mounted frequently–both by the *Peredvizhniki* and by the South of Russia artists. I wrote about books, about pictures and, apart from this, I was considered the only person on the staff who could understand the English newspapers which we received.

So I made translations from them to be printed in our newspaper and immediately began to live as a regular millionaire, because on an average I was now earning 25 or even 30 roubles a month.

In 1903 the editors decided to send me to London as their own correspondent. Of course, as far as I was concerned this was much the same as going to live on a star. It was quite impossible to imagine that I, a semi-pauper boy, should suddenly be going to London in lordly style and with a salary of 100 roubles a month.

How I lived in London, how I spent one and a half years, wandering from boarding house to boarding house I cannot tell you here, it is too long a story. Suffice it to say that our newspaper was forbidden by the mayor of the town, not quite forbidden, that is, but forbidden to be sold retail. So I found myself living in London unsupported by so much as one penny from any source. In those days I made a thorough study of the science of how to live in London as a pauper who did not know where his next bite of bread was to come from. That was in 1903. Of course, I had to leave my boarding house. I moved to a street–whether or not it exists still I do not know–called Great Church Street, a terrible street inhabited mainly by the out of work. I lived in a room with a fireplace in which, naturally, there was never any fire for the simple reason that I had no coal, but the most appalling soot used to come down the chimney at the least breath of wind. I battled with it. My hands were always black as a chimney-sweep's. The previous inhabitant of that room had been a thief. This thief had ordered himself deliveries of milk and bread for a whole month in advance. And so, when our door knocker was banged (they used to hang knockers on the doors there), if it was the milkman knocking he would cry "Milk!" just like back home they shouted "*Moloko*!" And I would run down stairs as fast as my legs could carry me, grab the milk (it used to come in a small sort of bucket) and, at the same time, grab the bun which the baker delivered to that same thief, eat it to help me going for the rest of the day, and set out to stagger about London offering my assistance to all kinds of businesses. Everywhere I was shown the door because I was unshaven, my collar was dirty and, in general, I quite failed to inspire confidence.

I could go on to tell how I got out, how, at long last, I found a man who offered me a free cabin on the steamer *Gisella Gredl*, bound for Constantinople. How I arrived at Constantinople and then at Odessa. But I am not going to. In Odessa I ran straight into a great event, one I was to remember all my life–the mutiny of the *Potemkin.*

All Odessa was as though reborn, we were all convinced that after the *Potemkin* would come a whole squadron of rebel ships, that they would end by introducing some extraordinary freedom. As for me, I was destined to pay two visits to the ship.

We had heard that the *Potemkin* lacked fresh water. But we, that is the actor Nikolai Khodotov (who was at that time a friend of mine) and two or three others–there was a writer of the name of Yablochkov–we all went down to the port and decided that the least we could do was to take a barrel of kvass out to the ship.

With respect we looked up at the majestic, awe-inspiring vessel. We could already see the people on it with the naked eye, without binoculars. We cruised round it in reverent silence. Then, to my horror, our artist, who had up to now kept perfectly quiet, suddenly hailed the *Potemkin* sailors at the top of his voice: "Ahoy there, lads!" The familiar "lads" filled me with indignation and I was ready to set upon the loud-mouthed fool with my fists, threatening to put the boat about and head back for port if he so much as opened his mouth to speak again. He was embarrassed but soon recovered, and a minute later was yelling even louder: "Don't be afraid, we're all for you!"

This really did sound stupid: to yell up at a giant from a tiny cockle of a boat: "Don't be afraid!" At that moment on the ship's ladder, way above our head, a student appeared. Looking very worried, he rapped out the impatient question: "Have you brought the proclamations?" "Which proclamations?" "From the Social-Democratic Party," he snapped in a clear, shrill voice. "No, we've only brought kvass," we replied in some confusion. The student made an impatient gesture with his hand and seemed about to go away quite uninterested in us, when suddenly he noticed Khodotov. "Comrade Khodotov?" The young man asked in surprise, peering down at the actor with myopic eyes, and promptly recommended the sentry on duty at the bottom of the ladder to permit him to come up.

Khodotov, however, was in no hurry to accept the invitation. After all, he was an "actor of the Imperial Stage."

He remained sitting in the boat with his white cap pulled down over his eyes. And so, since the student had run off and the sentry did not know which of us was Khodotov the artist and a young Caucasian swung up onto the ladder in his place. The sentry let them pass. After them, I came. With great difficulty we hauled ourselves up onto the deck where, to our disappointment, we saw nothing but backs–the backs of the *Potemkin*'s crew

who, standing in a tight semi-circle a good way away, were listening to some orator or other.

Perhaps the most interesting moment was when we were already preparing to leave and the *Potemkin* sailors came running up to us, all with letters for their relatives and friends. Even those who had no letters ready dictated the addresses of people we were to send notes to. Well, I stuffed all those letters into my jacket and then, so as not to arouse suspicion, I put them all into ordinary envelopes and sent them off one by one to their destinations.

These days of freedom made such an impression on me that when I moved from Odessa to Petersburg I immediately began to publish a weekly newspaper there which I called *Signal* and which was altogether directed to the overthrow of the powers that be. Now it always somehow surprises me to look at those numbers of the journal and to find my own naive verses there. In this journal we showed Tryepov[1], who had just issued his famous order not to spare the ammunition, standing with a scroll of paper bearing the text of the order "*Patronov ne zhalet*!" The wind had bent back the top of the paper and the order read: "*tronov ne zhalet*!" And this "Don't spare thrones!" (which was how the order now read–*Tr.*) intrigued the public beyond measure. They rushed to buy it: "Give us the journal where they've written 'Don't spare thrones!' "

Naturally, we also ridiculed the Premier, Witte. A deputation of workmen had been to see him and he had not known how to address them: he did not wish to call them comrades and he could think of nothing better to say to them than "brothers." Now that word "brothers" on his lips when addressing workers produced a whole crop of satyrical verse. The crux of the matter was that the tsarist government were in urgent need of money to strengthen the police and their spies and for this reason they were negotiating for a foreign loan.. Witte sent his ministers to the foreign bankers. One of the bankers, however, on whom Witte had particularly counted, soon saw when he came to Russia that Nicholas II's Manifesto promising freedom was in fact "writ on water." He refused the loan.

And so, parodying Pushkin ("Budrys is father to three sons") I composed the following lines:

Three ministers assist our "brother."
In conference close with one another.
He says: "Come, brothers, let's debate
How you and I may best procure
Some capital investiture
And yet preserve intact our virgin state.

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[1] Tryepov–the governor-general of Petersburg at that time, notoriously reactionary. This order of his was a command to shoot revolutionaries–*Ed.*

Each minister then goes tearing off and brings back something quite different from that which Witte requires.

We wrote a great many verses in this style. Finally, I was summoned to appear before the Special Inquiry Agent Obukh–Voshchatynsky and charged according to articles 103 (overthrow of the existing order), 106 (something else perfectly terrible) and 129 *(lèse-majesté* and just about everything else you can think of), and committed to preliminary confinement. Soon I was informed that I was to be brought to trial. And, of course, at the beginning of 1906 cells in the Peter-and-Paul Fortress were already prepared for all the likes of us. Severe measures had already been taken, for the public prosecutor appointed was one Kamyshansky, a ferocious brute who had been giving the task of winding up and stamping out all our satyrical literature.

I was tried *in camera,* because of the *lèse-majesté* charge. There was I sitting in a great court room with an entirely empty auditorium before me and, on the bench, a great number of Senators who had gathered to hear how my lawyer, the then famous Oscar Gruzenberg who had defended Gorky and Korolenko and was generally much loved in literary circles because he managed all the writers' cases for them–how this lawyer of mine would go about getting me off the charge of *lèse-majesté.*

Gruzenberg pronounced a splendid speech. Please don't think that I held my head proudly when I was led in between two soldiers with naked sabres, or when I sat down at the bar to listen to the prosecutor's speech. The thing that particularly insulted me about this speech, that really and truly horrified me, was that he called my verses pathetic, semi-literate scribblings. That really did hurt my feelings. But it was all one with the rest of his speech–he just shouted. He began by saying that the revolutionary ferment was over, that the rebels had suffered a shameful defeat. The healthily-minded elements of the country had drawn back from them in disgust. It was now clear to all that the much-vaunted freedom of the press was nothing more than licence for impertinence, shamelessness and unbridled lying. Among other brazen literary renegades there were even some who had dared to raise a criminal hand against the sacred person of His Majesty the Emperor. And, with the utmost revulsion, as though he were touching something repulsively unclean, Kamyshansky flipped over the pages of my poor *Signal* and demonstrated–one after the other–the "criminal slander" against the "sacred person" of the tsar.

What could Gruzenberg say after that? He seemed to me totally crushed. His head was drooping, he was deathly pale, he rose to his feet. After the shouting of the prosecutor his voice seemed singularly quiet and even apologetic. In a small, dreamy kind of voice, he said, addressing the judge:

"Imagine, please, that I. . . say, on that wall over there. . . were to draw a donkey. And some passer-by just happened to remark for no conceivable reason: that's prosecutor Kamyshansky."

Here he was interrupted by a furious ring from the chairman.

"Who is guilty of insulting the prosecutor? I who drew the donkey or the passer-by who permitted himself to remark that in my innocent drawing he for some reasons distinguished the features. . . of a certain respected personality of this court? The case is clear: the passer-by, naturally. The same thing is happening here. What does my client here do? He draws a donkey, a degenerate, a pigmy. And Pyotr Kamyshansky is bold enough to declare in public that this is supposed to be His Imperial Majesty Nicholas the Second. Let him but repeat those words and we shall be constrained to bring him, the prosecutor, to justice and to apply to him, the prosecutor, the dread 129th clause which establishes the penalty for *lèse-majesté*!"

At this point Gruzenberg made full use of his imposing appearance! Throwing out his well-starched chest and looking down contemptuously at the prosecutor, he began to cross-question him as though he were the prisoner at the bar: "So, you assert that here, in this picture, it is His Majesty the Emperor who is portrayed? And that in these rude lampoons the reference is to him? And in this article, too?" Questions hailed down one after the other. The prosecutor blinked his short-sighted eyes in a lost sort of way and answered not a word. The Senators were amused: well done, Gruzenberg! Now he was proving yet again, already in quite a different voice, that in such important matters of state as *lèse-majesté* what was called for was not subjective guessing and supposition but solid and objective data.

I did not listen any more. What happened after that I do not remember. I do not even remember whether or not I thanked by friend and defender for saving me from prison. Shaken to the core by the unexpectedly favourable turn things were taking, I suddenly began to weep, to weep indecently, with loud sniffs, here in the courtroom, on my wife's shoulder, and for a long time I could not stop.

That then, was all my brief career as a political journalist.

After that, in 1907, I entered the field of literary criticism. I wrote a lot, about many writers: about Leonid Andreyev, Sologub, Merezhkovsky, and about many other men of letters who interested the society of that day.

Some part of these, I shall still say. . . youthful studies are being republished now in the 6th volume of my collected works, a very strange volume bearing the almost incredible legend: "1906-1968."

It would seem that in the 1900s and the 1910s I had already established myself as a literary critic. I had published the books: *From Chekhov to Our Days* (*Ot Chekhova do nashykh dney*), *A Book About Contemporary*

Writers (Kniga o sovremennykh pisatelyakh), Faces and Masks (Litsa i maski), and so I thought to continue my work, the work of criticism, which I felt to be my true calling, in such a way as to say something new, to notice something which no one before me had noticed, about every writer about whom I should speak. (This is why I consider that criticism is creative work and that it is our obligation to think deeply enough about every writer, not to repeat trite, stereotyped opinions about him but to discover something new in each one.)

Then, suddenly, everything changed. It happened that in 1915 Alexei Maximovich Gorky decided to found a special children's publishing house as a filial of his own Parus (The Sail). We decided to meet in order to go together to Ilya Repin to choose drawings which might be useful to us. There was I, then, and Alexei Maximovich on the station, it was our first meeting, I had never met him before. To begin with, the conversation limped along very painfully, then, when the train began to draw out of the station, Alexei Maximovich propped his chin on his two fists, supporting his elbows on the window-flap and said: "Let's talk about children." And we began to plan what sort of a publishing house we should have for children, what anthologies we should publish, what new books we should make. There and then we roughed out a plan for our publications. And from then on I began work on an anthology under the aegis of Gorky. The anthology which was later published under the title of *The Fir Tree* (*Yolka*) we had first meant to call *The Rainbow* (*Raduga*). That was in 1915.

Do not forget that the following year was 1916 when no one was interested in any children's anthologies, for after that came the great year of 1917.

At that time we all used to foregather at Gorky's. I, the artist Alexander Benois, two or three others, and there we worked on our anthology. It was then Alexei Maximovich said: "Anthologies of this sort ought to have some long children's poem, something epic on a large scale to hold the children's interest." And he suggested that I should write such a poem.

As I had never written poetry for children and my thoughts at that time were directed elsewhere I realized that it was no use expecting me to produce anything of the sort. However, it happened that I went to Helsinki: my little son fell ill there and began to run a high temperature. I brought him home by train and to stop him crying and fussing I began to tell him a story to the beat of carriage wheels, a story that I had been wanting to write for a long time but with which I had so far been completely unsuccessful:

Zhíl da býl
Krokodíl.
On po úlitsam khodíl,
Papirósy kuríl,

Po-turétsky govoríl–
Krokodíl, Krokodíl, Krokodílovich![1]

He stopped groaning for as long as I kept talking so I did my best to talk on as fast as I could and, of course, promptly forgot the story. Two or three days went by, however, my son got better, and then it appeared that he had remembered the whole story off by heart. And so began my many years of work as a children's poet–a poet for children.

So it all went until 1922 or '23. Alexei Maximovich's publishing house ceased to exist. *The Crocodile* was published elsewhere. And suddenly I discovered that children's poetry was what interested me most of all.

Now a book of my stories in verse, *Chudo-derevo* (The Magic Tree), is being published and not in the first edition–I only recently sent off my stories for a new edition: among them, of course, *Mukha-Tsokotukha* (The Fly).

I very much enjoy remembering how that particular piece was written. I used to be subject to sudden waves of happiness for no particular reason. At those very moments when things did not appear to be going too well for me, I would suddenly, in spite of everything, feel myself subject to some peculiar form of nervous excitement. Such a mood was upon me on the 29th of August 1923 when, on returning home to an empty flat (all my family were away in the country), I suddenly felt that I had been visited by what is usually known as inspiration.

Múkha, Múkha-Tsokotúkha, *Múkha pó polyu poshlá,*
Pozolóchennoye bryúkho! *Múkha dénezhku nashlá.*[2]

I could hardly get it down quick enough with a blunt end of pencil on scraps of paper. And then, to my confusion, I have to admit that, when I came to the part of the story where they all dance, I, a forty-two-year-old man beginning to go grey, began to dance myself. It was very awkward, because to dance and to write at the same time is rather difficult. I whirled out of the room into the passage and through to the kitchen, and suddenly I ran out of paper. In the passage I had noticed that the wall-paper was beginning to peel. I tore off a strip of wall-paper and finished the whole poem on it.

And so I became a professional children's writer. . . .

Translated by Avril Pyman

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[1] As there exists, so far, no really successful translation of this poem, we give here a literal rendering: Once upon a time there was /A crocodile./ He walked the streets, /Smoked cigarettes,/ Spoke Turkish,/ Crocodile, Crocodile, Crocodilovich.

All the lines except the last end on full masculine rhymes, and the rhythm of the Russian is indeed the rhythm of a railway train: –'–'–'. . .–*Tr.*

[2] Fly, fly, buzzy fly! /Gilded belly/ The fly crawled along the field,/ The fly found a coin.

We hope that those readers who know even a little Russian will appreciate the bouncing, rhyming couplets with which the poet begins the epic of the fly's birthday party, her capture by the wicked spider and gallant rescue by the mosquito–*Tr.*